
CHAPTER 8

SOCIETAL DILEMMAS: GAINS AND LOSSES

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Societal **dilemmas** are varied and numerous. In Chapter 7 of this volume, societal dilemmas were associated with the tensions that exist between the values, needs, and interests of individuals, on one hand, and the values, needs, and interests of society at large, on the other. In this chapter, we examine the societal dilemmas that result from the two-sided nature of the "change process." As we know, the world is constantly changing. Whether the changes are intentional or unintentional, they are often accompanied by positive and negative **consequences**. Because most changes result in **gains** for some and **losses** for others, societies find themselves in the difficult position of having to deal with "winners" and "losers" whenever a change occurs. The lesson in this chapter allows students to examine global changes with an eye toward identifying (a) the winners and the losers and (b) the gains and the losses associated with them. While exploring these real-life societal dilemmas, students learn relevant vocabulary in context and become more comfortable using English to discuss topics of a serious nature.

Teachers have several options of using this lesson: They can use it, with appropriate adaptations, for a single, stand-alone lesson; they can design a series of connected lessons that explore the topic in more detail; or they can develop a thematic unit that examines the topic from a variety of perspectives over a longer period of time. The ideas presented here are meant to serve as a starting point for teachers interested in exploring one aspect of societal dilemmas with their students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One way to build a civil society is to prepare citizens to be conscientious and responsible. Being a conscientious citizen involves such responsibilities as respecting neighbors, obeying laws, paying taxes, serving as a juror, registering to vote and voting knowledgeably, performing public service, and being informed and attentive to public issues. It is this last responsibility--being informed and attentive to public issues that is of local, national, and global importance and is the focal point of this chapter.

Being informed involves much more than reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, or debating issues with family, friends, and colleagues. It involves an understanding of the complexities of different issues and the consequences of various actions. Few issues and actions in society are simple.

Almost all have positive and negative consequences, whether political, economic, social, or environmental. What this suggests is that most issues and actions have both winners and losers. With any issue, an informed citizen should have the skills necessary to determine what is **at issue** and what is **at stake**. Similarly, with any given action (e.g., a decision, a solution to a problem, a law), an informed citizen should have the ability to describe the consequences of the action in terms of costs and benefits, gains and losses, winners and losers, as well as improvements and problems.

Situations in which there are both winners and losers create dilemmas for society. These dilemmas often result in tensions, conflicts, and contradictions. For a civil society to function, decision makers and citizens must strive to find a suitable balance between gains and losses, and between winners and losers, so that as many people as possible benefit from decisions that effect society. One way to develop the critical thinking skills needed to understand the gains and losses associated with societal dilemmas is to examine issues of local, national, and global significance. Consider the following examples:

- **Fact #1:** Between 1970 and 1990, worldwide chemical fertilizer usage tripled.
 - *Gains/Winners:* Better crops, increased food production, increased food supplies; people have better, more nutritious diets; people are healthier
 - *Losses/Losers:* Depletion of water resources, higher rates of illness, higher rates of cancer, soil degradation
- **Fact #2:** It is projected that over the next 25 years, 1.3 billion people will be added to the world's population.¹
 - *Gains/winners:* Few if any
 - *Losses/losers:* Less resources (food, water) for each new child, more disease, higher infant mortality, overcrowding of cities and villages, fewer opportunities for education for women
- **Fact #3:** The number of people living in **urban** areas will increase from 45.3 % in 1995 to 54.4% in 2015.
 - *Gains/winners:* Greater access to work, education, and health facilities
 - *Losses/losers:* Overcrowding of cities, lack of water, poor sanitation, poor garbage collection, lack of good housing
- **Fact #4:** It is predicted that global energy use will increase 40% between 1993 and 2010. Between 1971 and 1998, global energy use increased 70%.
 - *Gains/Winners:* Improved heating and cooling, health benefits, more stable food supply
 - *Losses/losers:* Loss of fossil fuels, air and water pollution, increase in earth's temperature (global warming), more illness because of pollution

In this lesson, students will examine dilemmas such as those listed above. Through group discussions, students will see how each change has created a dilemma for the world at large. They will use their problem solving abilities to (a) determine the gains/losses and winners/losers for each situation under

consideration and (b) understand the complexities of the world in which we live. It is hoped that the skills developed in this lesson will assist students in considering issues of more personal significance (for their families, communities, and countries), so that they can make wise decisions (or choices) and then accept the consequences of their actions, two characteristics of conscientious and responsible citizenship.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The following 50-minute lesson plan requires that students identify local or national changes that have led to gains (i.e., improvements) or losses (i.e., problems). Later they consider a set of changes with global significance to identify gains/losses and winners/losers. Teachers are encouraged to adapt this lesson to the language and content learning needs of their students. Adjustments can easily be made so that the lesson matches the needs of lower or higher proficiency English language learners.

Preliminary Lesson Planning

Materials:

Create a handout for Activity 1 that lists five to ten authentic global changes. When creating the handout, select items from [Appendix A](#) that will stimulate interest among your students, or incorporate other facts from an up-to-date almanac or reference book in the library. Make enough copies for everyone in class. If copying facilities are limited, list items on the blackboard or create an overhead transparency that can be displayed during Activity 1. Ideally students should not see the list until they have finished the warm-up activity.

Student grouping:

To save class time, have students form pairs with the person sitting next to them for the warm up activity; students will return to this original partner for Activity 2. The teacher will need to decide on procedures for grouping students for Activity 1. It is recommended that groups have no more than six participants each. If appropriate, make up tentative lists of group members. Make last minute adjustments when it is determined which students are actually in class.

Vocabulary considerations:

Consider the vocabulary that students need to know to complete the lesson successfully. Determine which vocabulary items the students already know and which items they will need to be introduced to. Some important terms, and their definitions, are included in a glossary in [Appendix B](#). Items listed in the glossary are written in **bold** print the first time that they are mentioned in the lesson plan.

Warm Up Activity (10 minutes)

Purpose:

- To stimulate student interest in the topic
- To tap students' background knowledge
- To give students a chance to communicate in English in a meaningful way

Procedures:

1. Ask students to fold a blank sheet of paper in half, lengthwise. (Model the process, if necessary.)
2. Ask students to write "changes Y improvement" at the top of the left-hand column and "changes Y problems" at the top of the right-hand column. (If necessary, model for students on the blackboard.)
3. Give students two minutes to list a minimum of two recent changes in their communities, countries, or regions that have led to improvements (in the left-hand column) and a minimum of two other recent changes that have led to problems (in the right-hand column).
4. In pairs ask students to compare their lists and consider the following questions (that can be written on the blackboard): Do you agree with your partner? Have the changes listed led to improvements or problems?
5. While students are conversing with their partners, write "changes Y improvement" on the left-hand side of the blackboard and "changes Y problems" on the right-hand side of the blackboard if you haven't done so before this time.
6. Ask pairs to look at their lists once again. Ask them to put an asterisk (*) next to the one change that has led to the most improvements and a double asterisk (**) next to the one change that has led to the most serious problems.
7. Ask volunteers to report briefly on changes that have led to improvements or to serious problems. Write student responses, in an abbreviated manner, on the blackboard. For each example, ask students who gains and who loses as a result of each change. (The goal here is to demonstrate that most changes, whether they are perceived to be positive or negative, have winners and losers.)
8. Tell students that they will work with the same partner toward the end of class.

Transition from Warm Up to Activity #1

Inform students that the class session will consider the effects of different changes around the world in relation to three questions: Do the changes represent gains, losses, or both? Who are the winners? Who are the losers?

Activity #1 (approximately 20-25 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide students opportunities to use English in a meaningful way
- To engage students in critical thinking activities
- To give students the chance to use key vocabulary and concepts

Procedures:

1. Assign students to groups. As students are forming their groups, give each student a copy of the handout (adapted from [Appendix A](#)).
2. Ask students in groups to do the following:
 - a. Consider each change listed on your handout.
 - b. State the change in your own words.
 - c. Decide if the change represents a gain, a loss, or both.
 - d. Decide who the winners are/what the gains are.
 - e. Decide who the losers are/what the losses are.

Have students to write down group decisions for (c), (d), and (e) on their handouts.

3. While students are working, circulate from group to group to answer questions, provide clarification, and keep students on task.
4. If one or more groups finish the task early, give them an additional task to keep them focused on the theme. For example, ask them to reconsider the items on the handout to identify (a) the change with the most serious implications, (b) the change with the least serious implications, and/or (c) the change that has impacted their own country the most, etc.
5. Ask for volunteers to report on group deliberations. As you go over items on the handout, solicit group interpretations for questions b-e listed in step 3 above.

Activity #2 (approximately 10-15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide students with opportunities to use English in a meaningful way
- To reinforce key vocabulary and concepts associated with the lesson
- To relate the previous activities to students' own lives

Procedures:

1. Ask students to return to the partners, with whom they worked during the warm-up activity.
2. Ask each pair to reconsider the change marked with a double asterisk (**) on their original worksheets. That is, ask students to focus on the change that has led to the most serious problems in their communities, countries, or regions. Ask them to discuss the problem by considering the questions listed below. Tell students to be prepared to report the problem and at least one solution to their classmates.
 - a. How can the problem be solved?
 - b. What can be done to create more winners than losers?
 - c. Ask for volunteers to report on problems and solutions generated in their discussions.
 - d. As student volunteers finish their brief reports, ask the class if they think the solutions are reasonable, possible, and/or feasible.

Cool Down Activity (approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide closure to the lesson
- To give students an opportunity to apply these concepts to their environment

Procedures:

Ask students to consider this question: What kinds of changes would you like to see in your country in the future? Who will the winners be? Who will the losers be? (Depending on the language skills needs of the students, they can be asked to respond to the questions in writing, with a free write, or in an open discussion.)

Possible Extensions to Lesson

1. Ask students any of these questions to extend the lesson.
 - a. To what extent do the dilemmas introduced in this lesson have global implications? National implications? Local implications?
 - b. What major dilemma(s) did this lesson **reveal**? Do all societies face similar dilemmas? Is our society any different from others?
 - c. Do all changes have winners and losers? Can you think of any changes that have only winners? Can you think of any changes that have only losers?
2. Identify the most serious problem facing your country today and then brainstorm a list of possible solutions. For each solution, identify the winners and losers.
3. Choose one of the issues listed on the handout. Find more information on the topic in the library. Prepare a written summary or an oral presentation of your findings.
4. Ask students to identify and discuss other societal dilemmas facing their nation.
5. Refer to the web sites listed in the next section of this chapter for information and lesson planning ideas about other societal dilemmas.

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Appendix A

Possible Items for Handout

1. The world's population grows by about 1 million persons every four days.
2. The 20th century began with less than 2 billion people on earth; it ended with more than 6 billion people.
3. The United Nations grew from 51 member nations in 1945 to 185 members in 1996.
4. The number of people living in urban areas will increase from 45.3 % in 1995 to 54.4% in 2015.
5. In 1988, the average infant **mortality rate** for developing nations was 86 (per 1000 live births). In 1992, the average rate was 75 (per 1000 live births).
6. Between 1970 and 1990, worldwide chemical **fertilizer** usage **tripled**.
7. Each year the size of the earth's desert lands increases by about 15 million acres.
8. It is estimated that tropical forests once covered 16 percent of the earth's land surface; by 1990, they covered only 7 percent of the land surface.
9. In the last 100 years, the level of the ocean has risen 10-20 centimeters.
10. **Life expectancy** in less-developed countries increased by 16 years between 1960-1990.
11. The average life expectancy on earth increased from 60 (in 1975) to 65 (in 1990).
12. It is predicted that global energy use will increase 40% between 1993 and 2010. Between 1971 and 1998, global energy use increased 70%.
13. In 1998, developed countries **consumed** nearly three quarters of all commercial energy.
14. Between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of people working in agriculture changed from 51% to 27% in Panama, from 95% to 91% in Niger, and from 84% to 76% in Thailand.
15. In 1992, sub-Sahara Africa experienced 3% population growth and 1.5% food production growth.
16. Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand could lose half their 1985 forest cover by the year 2000.
17. Deforestation in the Amazon **doubled** from 1994 to 1995.
18. Global paper **consumption** tripled between 1968 and 1998.
19. Global water consumption rose **six fold** between 1990 and 1995, more than double the rate of population growth during the same five year period.
20. By mid-1997, 171 countries had some access to the Internet.
21. During the past 30 years, larger numbers of children have been attending school and adult **literacy** has increased

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